

Holding steady: DPHHS says new program helping families, foster care

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HELENA – At a recent meeting in a room chock-full of people dealing with childhood and family issues, Sheila Hogan, director of the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS), announced the number of children in foster care in Montana has remained steady at 3,900 for more than a year.

“That may not sound like a success, but it is a big success,” she said.



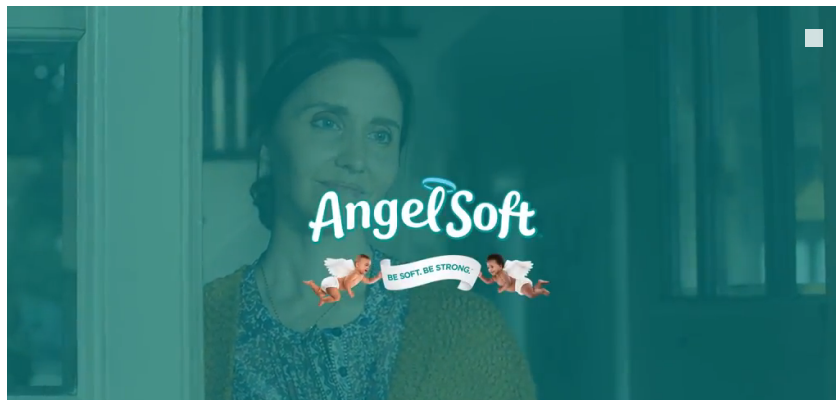
Sheila Hogan, right, director of the Department of Public Health and Human Services and Deputy Director Laura Smith tout the accomplishments of the First Years Initiative. (Photo: JON EBELT/DPHHS)

And while that might not seem like encouraging news to some, state officials are heartened the number has remained steady after skyrocketing for years. It's a number, however, that has sprouted 1,595% from 230 in 2010.

Hogan also told folks at the Aug. 13 seventh-annual Great Beginnings, Great Families event at Delta Hotels by Marriott Helena Colonial that the number of referrals of the First Years Initiative, which target child abuse and neglect, has grown from 157 to 955.

“I am really proud of the work we are doing,” Hogan said.

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Through FYI, families “touched” by the child protective system are referred to home visiting services in an attempt to reduce out-of-state placement in the foster care system, Hogan said.

FYI was launched last year in 13 sites that cover 14 counties, including Cascade and Hill. In 2017, prior to the launch, there were 157 referrals. Since Jan. 1, 2018, to July 31, 2019, there have been 955 referrals to home visiting sites, she said.

DPHHS (<https://dphhs.mt.gov/>) provides funding to 27 Home Visiting Program sites in Montana. Through FYI there are now 13 home visitors in the 14 counties. The funding supports a home visitor whose caseload is only Child and Family Services Division (CFSD) cases.D

The First Years Initiative (<http://bit.ly/2zB6tJO>) ensures resources are targeted for early years of a child's life, which are the most formative and vulnerable when it comes to child welfare and growth.

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It focuses on reducing child abuse, neglect and child deaths. The first stage was a home visiting collaboration between the state's Child and Family Services Division and the Family and Community Health Bureau of the department's public health and safety division.

Such visits are to help with healthy pregnancies, child health and development and aid with parent-child relationships.

The referrals demonstrate progress between CFS and the 13 home visitors, DPHHS Deputy Director Laura Smith said.

“It really bolstered those numbers and those connections for CPS workers to say ‘OK, I have this family I am working with for home visiting. I am going to go ahead and make a referral,’” she said.



The Department of Public Health and Human Services in Helena. (Photo: Tribune file photo/Phil Drake)

She said it is separate from the number of children in foster care, but said the state is seeing the influence of that through the stabilization of children entering foster care.

"I think it's part of a lot of work we've done," Smith said, adding the department is using innovative ideas.

Smith said for more than a year there has been a stabilization of kids into care.

"It's a significant development and frankly very noteworthy in a program that has seen an increase in the entry for several years," she said. She added that from 2016 to 2017 there was 19% growth and from 2017 to 2018 it was 12%.

She said the number is now 3,870.

Smith said 68% of cases of child put into foster care involve drug use. Of that 68%, 67% involve methamphetamine, which she said has risen slightly in the past few months.

"We continue to see meth as the primary drug involved in child welfare cases and yet through the First Years Initiative and home visiting, a lot of other work we are doing collaboratively across the state we continue to see that stabilization of entry into (foster) care," she said.

DPHHS spokesman Jon Ebelt said the home visiting program actually started in 2011 at 27 sites around the state that served 6,000 families and did 45,000 completed home visits.

Before FYI, families whose case was closed lost all the court-ordered support which again left them to face challenges on their own. FYI allows for continued support even after a case is closed, he said, adding the program was modified in 2018 to steer a piece of it to Child and Family Services.

"We know the more support we can provide to those families, the better it is in so many ways," Ebelt said.

Ebelt said home visiting often comes in and stabilizes the situation and helps families deal with issues such as finding housing and substance abuse aid.

Smith said the department funded the 13 home-visiting positions within Children and Family Services.

"We literally carved out money whose sole caseload is CFS families," Smith said, adding it has made a big difference.

She said the workers carry 18-25 families on their caseload, and they are focused on higher-risk families and abuse and neglect. Smith said she wants to pull together the 13 workers from the 14 counties and assess the successes and challenges and make any changes from there.

"For her (Hogan), it really demonstrates the profound impact that bringing resources can have in a community, particularly on an issue related to child abuse and neglect," Smith said. "The numbers show that."

Smith said families can decline the home visits.

"It has to be voluntary," she said.

Marti Vining, Child and Family Services administrator, said people refusing services is not common.

"Families have been open to services," she said. "The families that we deal with are wanting assistance and wanting help, and they view this as a resource and opportunity to address (challenges) within their family."

Vining said the agency has been doing training throughout the state with providers.

"The one thing we are hearing from providers at these trainings is that they really, really do think the First Years Initiative has played a big impact in families' lives in their communities."

Jo-Viviane Jones, family health services division manager of the Cascade City-County Health Department. (<https://www.cchdmt.org/>) said the focus has been to keep the children in the home because it can be traumatic for them and their families.



Ellie Crabtree, left, and Jo-Viviane Jones. (Photo: JON EBELT/DPHHS)

She said more information is provided in referral and helps to decide what home visitor to assign to the case.

Jones tries to attend monthly child protective team meetings and family engagement meetings to decide what support to put in place for the family.

She said there were 248 referrals from Child and Family Services to the program last year.

"In the beginning, we were bombarded," she said. "One home visitor could not fill that need, so I have six other home visitors who can handle some of cases."

She said 63 families enrolled, 20 stopped and 43 are partially enrolled.

"Parents are their children's first and most influential teachers," she said. Depending on the risk, workers concentrate on improving knowledge of parenting and child development. She said expectations and goals are set with the parent.

They are also offered help on such topics as nutrition, discipline, transition for teens, help moms going back to work.

The do social and emotional screenings routinely every few months.

Jones also said if it is believed children are not developing at a normal rate, they are referred to other services.

She said they provide just general support and prioritize what needs to be addressed first, and the worker will connect them with the resources in the community.

“We touch base with the family and make sure they are staying on track,” she said.

There are educational activities for families and workers to connect families with each other because many do not have family support.



Ellie Crabtree, home visitor for the Cascade City-County Health Department, works with families on a daily basis as part of the First Years Initiative that launched in 2018. Crabtree spends a recent afternoon bonding with a young child while taking in a painting art project. (Photo: JON EBELT/DPHHS)

“We know support from your family is particularly important for everybody,” Jones said.

She said there is also focus on getting children ready for school, so they have the same opportunity at school as other children.

Jones said the program has “absolutely” made a difference.

Ellie Crabtree, a home visitor, said she goes in and builds a relationship with families and discusses what they need. She said she tries to stabilize them and get them in a good spot.

She said having a home visitor means the family can have an advocate in dealing with Child and Family Services to help find a way to get children back in homes as soon as possible.

Crabtree said she talks with families about getting into routines. If they children get into a routine, they can transition from one thing to another because they will expect it.

Jones said she would like to see more reaching out to rural communities.

Matt Furlong, president of the child advocacy group the Montana Child Protection Alliance, looks at the program with a more skeptical eye.

“To me it looks like they are cherry-picking it,” he said, adding the program seems to pick parents who work well with each other.

“The parents with the highest level of need don’t want the support,” he said. “They don’t want eyes on their life. They know they struggle.”

Members of the alliance are embroiled in child custody issues with the state. They hold protests at the Capitol and elsewhere.

Furlong said he was not encouraged by the news the foster care rate is holding steady.



Matt Furlong, president, Montana Child Protection Alliance (Photo: Tribune photo/Phil Drake)

"The problem is not that child protection is needed or the numbers are up and down, it's the attitude," Furlong said, adding some parents believe the relationship with their children isn't being protected and that state workers are often hostile.

He said people are putting their best foot forward every day, and he appreciates that.

"We've seen a huge increase in the number of calls we are getting since the legislative session," he said. "When you remove a child from parent you should expect a parent to be upset."

"We see so many who should not be removed in the first place."

But he said the state has made some positive gains as it builds on the parent-child foundation, saying 40% of children are not prepared to enter kindergarten.

"I think it can get some kids closer to readiness for school," he said.

Furlong also complimented the DPHHS for opening a portal called [Parenting Montana](https://parentingmontana.org/) (<https://parentingmontana.org/>) that provides helpful tips on dealing with family problems.

"I think it's good help for parents who don't know what to do in certain situations," he said.

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For more on the First Years Initiative, go to: <http://bit.ly/2zB6tJO> (<http://bit.ly/2zB6tJO>)

For more on the state Department of Public Health and Human Services, go to: <https://dphhs.mt.gov/> (<https://dphhs.mt.gov/>)

For more on the Cascade City-County Health Department, go to: <https://www.cchdmt.org/> (<https://www.cchdmt.org/>)

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